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ABSTRACT

This paper is intended to provide basic information to minority parents to support their involvement in the education of their gifted and talented children. The first section reviews federal and state (Georgia) definitions of gifted and talented as well as regulations concerning eligibility and retesting. The second section identifies typical characteristics of gifted and talented students in the areas of: motivation and interests, communication, memory, problem solving, inquiry, insight, reasoning, and imagination. The nurturing home environment is the focus of the third section which notes such nurturing aspects as achievement aspirations, language modeling, academic guidance, intellectuality, activities in the home, and work habits. The final section lists important resources--13 books, a publishing company, and three periodicals. Suggestions for minority parents conclude each section. (Contains 8 references.) (DB)

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# Minority Parents' Role in the Education of Their Gifted and Talented Children

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Minority Parents' Role in the Education of Their Gifted and Talented Children

When parents are actively involved in the education of their children, they are in a better position to be (a) an advocate on their children's behalf and (b) a knowledgeable monitor of their children's progress throughout their school years. Nowhere is this active involvement of minority parents in the education of their children more critical than in the area of gifted and talented education. Though it is strongly asserted that the representation of minority children in gifted programs should be more closely aligned with their number in the school-aged population, it is in this educational area that they are least well represented. National statistics suggest that the ratio between majority-minority children's participation is five to one.

For the past thirty years, numerous school districts across this country have initiated special programmatic efforts to address this inequity in representation. The number of minority students identified and served in gifted programs, however, has not appreciably changed. An oft cited problem is the limited support received from the home and the community of minority students. What do minority parents need to know if they are to be effective advocates for their children? How do they know if they have a gifted and talented child? What provisions can they make in their homes to support their development? What resources are available to inform them about gifted children and their appropriate programs and curriculum? The purpose of this paper is to provide basic information to minority parents to support their involvement in the education of their gifted and talented children. Basic answers to these questions will be discussed in four areas: (a) federal and state definitions, (b) characteristics of the gifted and talented, (c) the nurturing home environment, and (d) important resources. The focus will be on what is, not what should be. Each section will conclude with suggestions for minority parents.

## Who are the Gifted and Talented?

### Federal and State Definitions of the Gifted and Talented

A most important first step is to be aware of the definitions used to determine who will be served in gifted and talented programs. In the early 1970's a special committee appointed by Commissioner of Education Sidney Marland formulated the following federal definition of the gifted and talented:

Gifted and Talented children are those identified by professionally qualified persons who by virtue of outstanding abilities are capable of high performance. These are children who require differentiated educational programs and services beyond those normally provided by the regular school program in order to realize their contribution to self and society. Children capable of high performance include those with demonstrated achievement and/or potential in any of the following areas:

1. General intellectual ability.
2. Specific academic aptitude.
3. Creative or productive thinking.
4. Leadership ability.
5. Visual and performing arts.
6. Psychomotor ability. (Marland, 1972)

This federal definition was revised in 1978. As the reader will note, the primary difference is that psychomotor ability is excluded. The primary reason for this exclusion was that certain artistic psychomotor talents could be included under the visual and performing arts; athletically gifted students were being adequately served in existing programs. This new definition read as follows:

> The gifted and talented are . . . . children and, whenever applicable, youth who are identified at the preschool, elementary, or secondary level as possessing demonstrated or potential abilities that give evidence of high performance capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, specific academic, or leadership ability or in the performing arts, and who by reason thereof require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school. [U.S. Congress, Educational Amendment of 1978, P.L. 95-561, IX (A)]

Several definitions since then have focused on the behaviors exhibited by a person rather than a label to be placed on individuals. The most popular example is the definition offered by Renzulli (1978):

> Gifted behavior . . . reflects an interaction among three basic clusters of human traits - these clusters being above average (but not necessarily high) general and/or specific abilities, high levels of task commitment (motivation), and high levels of creativity. (p. 180)

Many states continue to pattern their definition after the federal definition, however. In addition, they tend to provide services for children identified as intellectually gifted first.

Some extend services to those with specific academic abilities and with creative abilities. Even fewer attempt to serve all the categories of giftedness specified in the federal definition.

The state of Georgia, for example, has chosen to provide services to the intellectually gifted. The definition specifying those children who should be identified and served thus reads:

> The gifted student is one who demonstrates a high degree of intellectual ability and who needs special instruction and/or special ancillary services in order to achieve at levels commensurate with his/her intellectual ability. (Georgia Department of Education Regulations and Procedures, 1986)

To be eligible for services in Georgia, a K-2 student must perform at the 99th percentile on a test of mental ability; 3rd through 12th grade students may perform at the 96th percentile level on a test of mental ability provided they have an 85th percentile composite of 90th percentile total reading, including reading comprehension, or total math. Achievement test scores are not necessary criteria for any K-12 students who perform at the 99th percentile on a test of mental ability.

These regulations further specify that retesting may occur for two groups of students. Students whose test scores fall within one standard error of measurement of the required scores for the instrument used may be retested. The second group includes those students who score above the 90th percentile on a test of mental ability but are handicapped, economically disadvantaged, culturally different, or for whom there are documented compelling reasons suggesting that the first test score is an underestimate of students' abilities. The score on the second test must still meet the required percentile score (96th or 99th percentile) to establish eligibility.

<u>Suggestions for Parents</u>

1. Contact your school at the beginning of the year to find out when they assess students for the gifted program. This is very important. While some schools send letters home to all parents, many only send letters to those parents whose children have been referred by a teacher.

2. Go to your city/county library or the library of a local college or university to consult sources on testing. There are many books that provide useful information on topics such as the meaning of test scores. If you still have questions, contact your school or a professor at a college or university for assistance.

3. Contact your school or the state department for information on the identification procedure for gifted programs, the appeals process, and general information on the type program experiences you should expect for your children should they be eligible for services. You should also inquire about other available enrichment activities inside and outside the school. Every state has someone who is responsible for the conduct of the gifted program. Your school can tell you who that person is or you may call the information number for the State Department of Education.

4. Be sure your children are prepared to do their best when they take the qualifying test(s). Your school can tell you about things you can do. Also, ensure your children that if they do not meet eligibility requirements, that does not mean that they are failures. Continue to seek ways at school and in the community to support and encourage their educational achievements.

5. When you receive the report of your child's performance, do not hesitate to schedule a conference if you have any questions or if there is something you do not understand about the report.

## What are the Characteristics of Gifted and Talented Children?

Many studies have been conducted and observations made delineating the characteristics of gifted and talented children. In this section, important characteristics shall be presented in the context of general constructs associated with giftedness.

### Motivation and Interests

Children who are gifted and talented tend to be interested in a lot of things and show strong motivations to persist in activities associated with these interests. Sometimes the interest areas may seem to you to be too complex for children of that age or out of line with common expectations or thoughts on a subject. A typical statement on a characteristic checklist for the gifted and talented is "Unusually varied interests and curiosity" (Clark, 1988, p. 126). You might also notice the things your children collect and their hobbies, how absorbed they become in intellectual tasks, any special skills they exhibit that are unusual for their age or grade, and the extensiveness of their exploratory behavior (Hagen, 1980, pp. 24-25).

### Communication

Gifted and talented children tend to be very effective communicators in a variety of ways: verbally, analytically, artistically, kinesthetically. Some may show great adeptness in one way or a combination of ways. Attention should be paid to the way your children express themselves and their ideas. Typical checklist items referring to unusual

communication skills are: (a) high level of language development, (b) high level of verbal ability, (c) ability to generate original ideas and solutions, and (d) unusual capacity for processing information (Clark, pp. 126-127).

Other ways of expressing this characteristic refer to (a) their use of language; (b) the quality of examples, illustrations, or elaborations used in explaining something or in describing events or in telling stories; and (c) their use of quantitative expressions and quantitative reasoning (Hagen, 1980, pp. 23-24).

Humor

Gifted and talented children tend to convey and pick up on humor in situations very well. This construct reveals itself in their ability to synthesize key ideas in complex situations or problems in a humorous way; their sense of timing in words and gestures such as that demonstrated by gifted comedians or writers; their uncanny ability to use puns, and the like. Typical checklist items seeking observations of this behavior are (a) keen sense of humor - may be gentle or hostile; (b) large accumulation of information about emotions that has not been brought to awareness; and (c) heightened capacity for seeing unusual and diverse relationships, integration of ideas and disciplines (Clark, 1988, pp. 127-128).

Memory

The ability to store and retrieve relevant information from short- and long-term memory is a strong indicator of giftedness. Gifted and talented children tend to know a lot about a lot of things that are school and non-school related. Sample checklist items seeking to evaluate this capacity include "extraordinary quantity of information, unusual retentiveness" (Clark, 1988, p. 127) and (a) breadth of information on a range of topics and in a variety of areas, and (b) depth of information in a particular area, (Hagen, 1980, p. 24-25). Tonemah (1987) refers to this as the ability to listen well and remember things that are heard, and Gallagher and Kinney (1974) refer to it as the ability to use stored knowledge to solve problems.

Problem Solving

Having and using a variety of plans for recognizing and solving various kinds of problems and having the ability to change these plans when they are not working is another clue to giftedness and talentedness in children. Having an immediate answer is not the goal; being open to a variety of ways of getting the most effective answer to a complex problem for which there is no known solution is a more typical goal. Hagen (1980, pp. 24-26) describes this characteristic in several ways: (a) student's ability to devise or adopt a

systematic strategy for solving problems and to change the strategy if it is not working; (b) the innovative use of common materials in the classroom or outside of it; (c) persistence on uncompleted tasks; and (d) a preference for complexity, difficulty, and novelty in tasks.

Inquiry

Parents and teachers, alike, frequently notice the child who asks a lot of questions. These are not just ordinary questions; these are frequently penetrating questions that cause one to stop and think or wonder where in the world this question came from. This is a sign of gifted and talented children demonstrating their insatiable curiosity about their world. They inquire into their world in a variety of ways: (a) questioning, (b) using trial and error experiments to find out, and (c) testing limits. Typical questions exploring the presence of this behavior refer to the "quality of questions asked" (Hagen, 1980, p. 23) and whether the child "asks a lot of questions or enjoys debating issues" (Clark, 1988, p. 225).

Insight

Gifted and talented children tend to appear to be wise beyond their years. They seem to be able to (a) understand a situation without it being explained to them; (b) quickly grasp central concepts or ideas; and (c) sense the deeper meaning of a problem, event, or situation. Clark (1988, p. 126-127) characterizes these behaviors as follows: (a) advanced comprehension; (b) unusual quantity of input from the environment through a heightened sensory awareness; and (c) heightened self-awareness.

Reasoning

In psychological terms, reasoning is highly conscious, directed, controlled, active, intentional, forward-looking, and goal-oriented thought. Reasoning requires knowing something about the world in which we live and consists of more than just a collection of memories. It includes principals of generalizations extracted from the past, which can be applied in new situations to guide thought (Lindzey, Hall, & Thompson, 1978). Early differential patterns for thought processing or thinking in alternatives, abstract terms, sensing consequences, making generalizations, and using metaphors and analogies are ways that the unusual reasoning abilities of gifted and talented children are described on checklists (Clark, 1988, p. 122).

Imagination

A vivid imagination, creating pictures of what might be, is another characteristic of gifted children. Not content with the way things are, they often envision possibilities where others see the commonplace continuing. This equips them to "extend and

extrapolate knowledge to new situations or unique applications" (Gallagher & Kinney, 1974). Your children are demonstrating to you their imagination abilities when they "try to do things in different, unusual, imaginative ways and show enjoyment with new routines or spontaneous activities" (Clark, 1988, p. 226). Imagination is one aspect of high creative ability or children's unusual ability to think fluently, flexibly, originally, and elaborately.

Suggestions for Parents

Since the identification of children for gifted programs usually begins with some type of screening, the following suggestions are offered as ways in which you can gather appropriate information and participate in the nomination process. While it is generally felt that all parents will consider that their children are gifted, there is other evidence to suggest that this is not necessarily so. When parents know what to look for they can provide valuable information that can be used in evaluating their children's potential for performance at an extraordinary level.

1. Carefully study characteristics of gifted and talented children such as those provided above. Observe for evidences of these behaviors in your child's performance. Remember that **you cannot make your child gifted** but you can observe when behaviors occur that indicate unusual potential.

2. Keep records of your child's performance. This does not have to be an elaborate system. Designate a box or a drawer where you will retain work samples. It is good to let children participate in selecting some of the things that they feel are good examples of their work.

3. Respond promptly when the school sends a nomination form home. Remember, if a referral form is not routinely sent home, it is the parents' responsibility to find out when referrals are being accepted for the gifted program. **This is not a time to be modest**. Just keep in mind that you want the best for your children and you want them to be in situations that will best challenge them. By keeping records of things they do at home and by initiating or responding to requests for a referral, you are facilitating their education and being an active advocate for them.

4. Finally, even with your best efforts, you may feel the interpretation of your child's performance is not accurate. Find out how you can appeal decisions. Only in this way can you fully exercise your rights as a parent acting on behalf of your child.

## How Can Parents Create and Maintain an Environment that Nurtures the Gifted and Talented Child?

Every child needs to grow up in as enriched, supportive, and encouraging an environment as is possible. This next section provides some general features of such an environment and suggests ways in which parents can develop this type home setting as they attempt to meet the challenge of facilitating the development of their children at home.

In a study on environmental process variable related to educational achievement conducted by Dave (1963), six variables were identified as significant: (a) achievement press, (b) language modeling, (c) academic guidance, (d) family activeness, (e) intellectuality of the home, and (f) work habits of the family. Since these variables were found in this and subsequent studies to have an effect on children's intellectual development, they will be used to provide the organizational framework for the discussion in this section. The following definitions and brief discussion of these variables provide a good description of a nurturing home environment.

1. Achievement press refers to the aspirations parents hold for the education of the child and their interest in, knowledge of, and standards of reward for the child's educational achievement. While circumstances may not allow some families to afford the same things for their children that other families can, holding high aspirations is free. Very simply, this factor implies that parents need to exercise their own creativity in finding ways to not only encourage and support the achievement of their children, but to make use of the many resources available at school and in the community to reinforce these high expectations.

2. Language modeling refers to the quality of language used by the parents and taught either directly or indirectly to the child. There are a variety of ways that parents may provide appropriate language models for their children regardless of their educational background. The story is told that Sidney Poitier developed his very articulate use of language by listening to the radio while he was washing dishes in the kitchen of a New York restaurant. Parents may encourage and listen with their children to well-spoken persons on television. Not only will good speech habits be developed, but a wealth of knowledge on a variety of topics is also accumulated. Children may also be encouraged to read good literature, whether it is owned by the home or borrowed from the city/county library. Parents' inventiveness in exposing their children to the best information possible is limited only by their imagination.

3. Academic guidance refers to the availability and quality of help provided by the home for school related tasks. There are many things the parent can do in the home to provide a nurturing home environment. One that immediately comes to mind is arranging a time when parents and children are engaged in learning activities. Children may be doing their homework while parents are engaging in some type of learning activity. It should be a time when there is no television or radio playing. As often as is possible, it should be held at a regularly scheduled time. This allows this type activity to become routine so that even when parents cannot be present or must otherwise be engaged in a pressing task, children know what is expected. This time should be kept consistent, even when there is no homework assignment.

Parents should also contact the school for extra enrichment activities they can do at home with their children. It is important that this time not be solely associated with homework but that it also be used to engage in extending activities.

4. Intellectuality in the home refers to the intellectual interests and activities of the family. More specifically, the types of reading done, the nature and extent of conversations about ideas, and the nature of the intellectual models parents provide. Many games, such as Concentration, Password, puzzles, word games and the like model the type tasks children may be asked to perform on tests. The school and city/county libraries are useful sources of books and other materials that may be selected for their intellectual value. Read selected books together. Discuss one item from the evening news; have each family member express his/her opinion about a report or an event. At least try to get the Sunday newspaper and use it as a tool for learning and discussion; the Sunday newspaper always contains discussions of topics beyond the usual reporting of events of the day. The sports page offers a variety of ways to engage in mathematical reasoning and memory development activities.

5. Activity in the home refers to the degree to which parents stimulate and encourage their children to explore the larger environment. Our homes, our yards, and our neighborhood contain a variety of things to explore, things to wonder about, things to observe. Look around you. Making up stories or poems about things, devising treasure hunts based on clues that require the child to figure something out, having the child to think of uses for kitchen utensils that are different from their normal use are just a few examples of ways to use the home and community as a learning laboratory. These suggestions demonstrate ways parents can assist their children in the development of skills in the areas of research, organization, imagination, language usage, and problem solving.

6. Work habits refers to the degree of structure and routine in home management and the emphasis on educational activities over other pleasurable things. The one thing that all children, and especially gifted and talented children, need in their lives is structure. This structure should not be so overbearing that it takes away opportunities to make choices. But it should be arranged in such a way that children learn responsibility on age-appropriate tasks, know what to expect and when, and know what the limits are.

These six variables have been found to correlate very highly with and to have a great influence on children's intellectual development. The sky is the limit in how they are used in structuring a nurturing home environment. Parents and their children have everything to gain and nothing to lose.

Suggestions for Parents

1. Try to arrange a place in the home, free from as much distraction as is possible, where children can concentrate on tasks.

2. Try to think of as many things as you can that involve the entire family. This is the easiest way for parents to model behaviors. Rather than say, "Do as I tell you," engage in activities with your children as much as is possible. Do simple things like picking an "Event of the Week" which the whole family tries to learn as much about as they can. At the end of the week, each person is responsible for telling something about that event and is encouraged to try to find out something that no one else will find out. Some kind of treat could be planned for the whole family - going out for ice cream, going for a walk together, and the like. This activity can also be extended to other things like learning a new word every week. Each family member must learn the meaning of the word, learn how to spell it and use the word in conversation in as many ways and as often as they can.

3. Remember that breakthrough ideas never come from ordinary thinking. Refrain from telling your children that something is impossible or is unrealistic. Instead assist them in trying to find out, to prove or disprove a theory they may have.

4. Encourage your children in the pursuit of their hobbies and collections. Their room may get messy at times but remember, they are engaging in important organizing skills. When they do not have a room of their own, try to create a space somewhere in the house that is their private spot. Parents should encourage their children to have hobbies, to follow through on them and to strive for creditable performances and a level of mastery with which they are personally satisfied. You do not want them to become overly dependent on external evaluations of their ability; you want to help them also become self-evaluators.

5. Place an early emphasis on verbal expressions, reading, discussing, and question asking. Encourage rather than deter question asking; answer questions completely and in such a way that they stimulate further thinking on the topic; help them learn how to sharpen questions by rephrasing them. Learning how to ask good questions is a critical key to learning; it is a behavior that should be encouraged.

6. Keep communication channels open. Sometimes gifted and talented children will ask questions about things that you may not be prepared for them to think about; they are often more mature than their chronological age-mates. Try to answer their questions in as intellectually honest a way as you can. It is important that they see you as someone they can talk to about events that are puzzling them, regardless of the topic.

7. Seek as many ways as you can to stimulate your child. Be careful, however, about becoming a "pushy" parent or one who tries to make up for things that did not happen in your life. Also avoid placing your children on "exhibition" or in situations where they are asked to show off their knowledge or abilities before adults and, especially, before their friends. They are having a hard enough time as it is wrestling with their differences; do not exacerbate them.

8. Be as supportive as you can of efforts the school provides for gifted and talented children. When there is disagreement or when there are things happening that you disapprove of, arrange to talk with school personnel. Do not let your children become "parrots" of your feelings. Gifted children will often say, for example, that "they are bored" when in actuality they are not; they are repeating what they have heard their parents say. Besides, you do want to teach your children the responsibility they have to relieve themselves of boredom; the total responsibility should not rest with the school. If they are to fully realize their potential, they must learn the part they must play in becoming an independent learning.

## What Resources are Available for Parents of Gifted and Talented Children?

Current information on gifted and talented children is available through numerous printed sources, people, and organizations. A few are listed below. Parents are urged to stay in touch with their city/county or college/university librarians and educational personnel at their child's school for information on new resources.

Books

Each of the following books provides good background information on the gifted and talented. Many contain specific things parents can do. Your city/county or college/university librarian should have copies. You might also check with the teacher for the gifted at your child's school.

1. Amabile, T. M. (1989). Growing up creative: Nurturing a lifetime of creativity. New York: Crown.
2. Bright, L. D. (1985). The gifted kids guide to puzzles and mind games. Minneapolis, MN: Wetherall Publishing.
3. Clark, B. (1988). Growing up gifted. Columbus, OH: Merrill.
4. Clemes, H. (1990). How to raise children's self-esteem. Los Angeles: Price Stern Sloan.
5. Delisle, J. R. (1984). Gifted children speak out. New York: Walker and Company.
6. Ehrilich, V. Z. (1982). Gifted children: A guide for parents and teachers. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
7. Lewis, D. (1979). How to be a gifted parent: Realize your child's full potential. New York: W. W. Norton.
8. Phillips, D. (1991). How to give your child a great self-image. New York: Plume.
9. Perino, S. C., & Perino, J. (1981). Parenting the gifted: Developing the promise. New York: R. R. Bowker.
10. Smutny, J. F., Veenker, K., & Veenker, S. (1989). Your gifted child: How to recognize and develop the special talents in your child from birth to age seven. New York: Facts on File.
11. Tackas, C. A. (1986). Enjoy your gifted child. New York: Syracuse University Press.
12. Vail, P. L. (1987). Smart Kids with school problems: Things to know and ways to help. New York: New American Library.
13. Webb, J. T., Meckstroth, E. A., & Tolan, S. S. (1982). Guiding the gifted child. Columbus, OH: Psychology Publishing.

Publishing Company

A number of excellent books are available from the company listed below. Many excellent titles are available; some examples are listed. You may want to order a catalog:

Free Spirit Publishing, Inc.
400 First Avenue North, Suite 616
Minneapolis, MN 55401-1724
(612) 338-2068

1. Adderholt-Elliot, M. Perfectionism: What's bad about being too good?
2. Fisher, F., & Cummings, R. The school survival guide for kids with L. D.
3. Galbraith, J. The gifted kids survival guide (for ages 10 and under).
4. Galbraith, J. The gifted kids survival guide (for ages 11-18).
5. Heacox, D. Up from underachievement.
6. Johnson, G., Kaufman, G. & Raphael, L. Stick up for yourself: A 10-part course in self-esteem and assertiveness for kids.
7. Saunders, J. Bringing out the best: A resource guide for parents of young gifted children.
8. Walker, S. Y. The survival guide for parents of gifted kids.

Periodicals/Journals/Organizations

1. The Gifted Child Today. A magazine for parents and teachers of gifted, creative, and talented children. G/C/T, P. O. Box 6448, Mobile, Alabama 36660-0448.
2. School Success Network. Rosemont, New Jersey 08556. A letter published three times a year for parents and teachers of young children.
3. The National Association for Gifted Children. 1155 15th Street N. W., #1002, Washington, D. C. 20004. (212) 785-4286. Peter Rosenstein, Executive Director. Publishes the Gifted Child Quarterly.

Summary

Parents, this is not all you need to know and certainly not all you can do. It is merely a beginning. Of all the suggestions given, a most important one is to enjoy your child and share with them the joy of learning. Help achieving become a natural and enjoyable part of their lives.

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